

Citation for published version:

Deneulin, S 2013, 'Recovering Nussbaum's Aristotelian roots', *International Journal of Social Economics*, vol. 40, no. 7, pp. 624-632. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSE-2012-0127>

DOI:

[10.1108/IJSE-2012-0127](https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSE-2012-0127)

Publication date:

2013

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

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Recovering Nussbaum's Aristotelian Roots

Séverine Deneulin¹

Abstract

The paper examines the relationship between *Creating Capabilities* and political liberalism. It argues that the reality of climate change calls for the capabilities approach to be more rooted in a relational anthropology which the Aristotelian ethical tradition is more akin to. It discusses how traces of this ethical tradition can be found in Nussbaum's capabilities approach itself: affiliation as an architectonic capability leads to the common good being the end of political action, and practical reason as an architectonic capability leads to reasoning being structured by concerns for the common good. The paper concludes by suggesting some practical implications of an Aristotelian version of the capabilities approach.

The capabilities approach

Creating Capabilities aims at presenting the capabilities approach to a non-academic audience. The capability approach was initially framed by Amartya Sen to provide an alternative to the utility assessment of wellbeing which had prevailed in economics. Wellbeing, he argued, is best assessed not in the utility space but capability space, that is, in the freedom people have to do or be what they have reason to value (Sen, 1992).

Whereas Sen's capability approach is an evaluative space for assessing states of affairs and comparing them (Sen, 2009), Nussbaum's version of the capability approach offers a stronger programme for political action. Whereas Sen situates the evaluation space in the 'capabilities people have reason to choose and value' and leaves it to public debate to specify valuable capabilities (Sen, 2004), Nussbaum proposes that state of affairs be assessed on the basis of a list of ten central human capabilities, for public reasoning processes are not immune from power abuse and people may come to value certain 'sets of beings and doings' (capabilities) which may be harmful to them.

The central human capabilities are: to live a life of normal length; to have bodily health; to have bodily integrity; to think and reason (this includes guarantees of freedom of expression); to express emotions; to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life; to engage in social interaction and have the social bases of self-respect; to live with concern for the natural environment; to laugh and play; to control one's environment (this

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includes participation in political choices that govern one's life and work) (Nussbaum 2000, pp. 77-78; Nussbaum, 2011a: 33-34). The list is however open-ended in the sense that each central human capability can have many specifications given local contexts, and that other central human capabilities can be added (e.g. over the years, Nussbaum has added the capability to hold property rights as central human capability).

Whereas Sen limits the capability approach to a comparative exercise for evaluating states of affairs (Sen, 2009), Nussbaum brings it beyond an evaluative space towards a partial theory of justice by linking her central human capabilities to constitutionally guaranteed fundamental entitlements and by holding governments responsible for securing central human capabilities (Nussbaum, 2003, 2007).

She illustrates the reach of her capabilities approach with the life of Vasanti, an Indian woman from the state of Gujarat who is unable to do many things she values doing and being, such as having bodily integrity, being educated, having a decent and stable employment. Nussbaum argues that 1) analyzing Vasanti's life from the perspective of her list gives insight about deprivations and sufferings that no other ethical-theoretical framework would have highlighted, and 2) the capabilities approach gives citizens some framework to hold their governments responsible and accountable for what they should do, namely to protect a set of fundamental individual entitlements.

Nussbaum's project to bridge Sen's capability approach and political action dates back to the 1980s when she linked the capability approach to a 'thick vague theory of the good' (Nussbaum, 1990a: 217) and first proposed her list of central human capabilities as an approximation of what constitutes a good human life. There were constituents of a human life that all humans shared as being worthwhile and the aim of the government was to create the structuring conditions for people to live good human lives. She acknowledged nonetheless that holding such position went against the mainstream in political theory.²

Proposing a conception of the good, she argued, did not mean that humans had no choice left on how to live. Each constituent of a good human life is infused by choice and practical reason. Humans choose what, when and how to eat, with whom and how to be with others, with what and how to play. As Nussbaum summarized it: 'Truly human living requires performing all one's natural activities in a way infused by human choice and rationality; *and*

² 'This idea that a rather full account of the human good and human functioning must precede and ground an account of political distribution is alien to much recent work in political theory.' (Nussbaum, 1988: 150)

that the capability to function in this human way is not automatically open to all humans, but must be created for them by material and social conditions' (Nussbaum, 1988: 184).

Nussbaum's political activism has however taken another turn in the mid-1990s. Her list of central human capabilities is no longer a thick vague theory of the good, but is similar to Rawls's list of primary goods. The central human capabilities are what people need to have access to in order to pursue their own conception of the good. Her capabilities approach is no longer based on a comprehensive vision of the human good (performing activities characteristic of human life according to the exercise of reason). Setting the capabilities approach within political liberalism, Nussbaum contends, accommodates value pluralism and respects people's freedom to live a life of their choice, even if one profoundly disagrees with their choices (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011b).

Both her Aristotelian and political-liberal versions of the capabilities approach emphasize the centrality of freedom, but there is one difference. In the former, freedom is the expression of practical reason, of a deliberation about what constitutes the best choice in the context of the human good (Nussbaum, 1990a); in the latter, freedom is no longer constrained by concerns for the human good, a life freely chosen is the human good itself. The remainder of the paper examines whether such political-liberal version of the capabilities approach can protect people's lives from the destruction of what they value being and doing.

Affiliation and the common good

The subject of Nussbaum's capabilities approach is not groups but individuals. Each person has to be seen as an end in him/herself. Structures such as the caste system and patriarchy and groups such as religious and self-help groups are important in determining capability outcomes, but they should be left out of the evaluation space. What matters is not what a structure or group is doing, but how *each* individual is doing and the impact of these structures and groups on the lives of each individual.

This however does not exclude conceiving the person as a 'social being' (Nussbaum, 2011a: 39). Affiliation is an architectonic capability which influences all others: 'Affiliation organizes the capabilities in that deliberation about public policy is a social matter in which relationships of many kinds (familial, friendly, group-based, political) all play a structuring role' (Nussbaum, 2011a: 40). This capability for affiliation can be 'fertile' or 'corrosive'.³

³ Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) have coined these terms to distinguish capabilities which enhance other capabilities (fertile) from those which are detrimental to other capabilities (corrosive).

Considering the protagonist of *Creating Capabilities*, Vasanti, affiliation both furthers and undermines other central human capabilities. Belonging to SEWA, the Self-Employed Women Agency, one of India and Bangladesh's biggest NGOs, has enabled Vasanti to use a sewing machine and generate some employment and independence for herself. The good quality of the relationships among SEWA members has enabled her to recover a sense of bodily integrity through friendship with other women. But belonging to the scheduled caste, Vasanti faces racial discrimination and stigma.

Despite being considered an architectonic capability in both her Aristotelian and political-liberal versions, the role of affiliation in the overall aim of the capabilities approach is different. In the political-liberal version, affiliation is a capability whose function is the same as Rawls's primary goods, to provide means for people to pursue whatever conception of the good they have. If they choose not to make use of that capability, it is their own free choice. In the Aristotelian version, affiliation is part of what a good human life is. There is no choice about the very fact of being in relation with other people. Affiliation is constitutive of human living, but the ways one affiliates is subject, to a lesser or greater extent, to choice.

Another difference relates to the treatment of the common good. In the political-liberal version, the central human capabilities are enjoyed by separate individuals and not by individuals who form something bigger than their sum through their relations. There is no common end which individuals pursue except establishing the conditions (the principles of justice) which enable people to pursue their chosen ends – this may include pursuing a life which does not contribute to the wellbeing of other people (Keys, 2006: 34-35). In contrast, in the Aristotelian version, given that relationships structure a person's life, the quality of relationships becomes an integral part of good living. Whether SEWA empowers women or reproduces male patriarchy, or whether Indian cultural norms respect each person equally or disrespect some because of their birth, does not belong to Vasanti's life as such. Social relationships, and their quality, are as important as individual fundamental entitlements for assessing how well people are doing.⁴

Given affiliation, one's own good is co-dependent on a common good, a good constituted by the relationships one engages with. The good of the community formed by these relationships and the good of each individual are mutually implicating (Deneulin and

⁴ Alexander (2010) argues that the capabilities approach needs to include a republican understanding of freedom as non-dominating relationships. Wolff and de-Shalit (2007: 45) also argue that in addition to individual entitlements, a comparison of people's wellbeing – and by implication a comparative view of justice – needs to include people's ability to participate in society and collectively shape the public.

Townsend, 2007; Hollenbach, 2002). Freedom of speech may be enjoyed by individuals but it is the relationships of society as a whole which define the scope of freedom of speech and structure it. The capability to live in a free society, of which freedom of speech is one aspect, is a truly common good because it rests: 1) on citizens viewing each other in a certain way; 2) on citizens acting towards each other in a certain way because they view each other that way; 3) on citizens coming together in public dialogue to give concrete definitions of what a free society consists of.⁵ That Germany has different freedom of speech laws regarding the Holocaust than the United States demonstrates that individual capabilities rest on a common good, on a good which pertains to a specific set of relationships built through history but which does not pertain to any individual life as such. On an Aristotelian version of the capabilities approach, freedom of speech is a common end which individuals pursue together as part of their efforts at living a good life as members of specific political communities. On a political-liberal version, it is an all-purpose good for individuals to pursue their own ends.

Nussbaum (2011b) justifies her move from Aristotelianism to political liberalism on her increasing concerns to respect value pluralism. People have different views about how they should live and democratic societies should respect this. But originally, Nussbaum designed her list of central human capabilities on the basis of ‘Aristotelian essentialism’ (Nussbaum, 1992). A life which does not make use of these capabilities, does not constitute ‘good’ living. Because affiliation structures human life, humans do not simply strive for a good life for themselves but for a good human life *with* others. This means that the quality of relationships among citizens in a political community becomes a core component of each person’s good. For an Aristotelian version of the capabilities approach, justice is a virtue, not only of institutions but also of human beings. Justice as a virtue includes commitment to the common good, at the highest level, and the orientation of one’s actions towards that aim (Keys, 2006: 122-3).

What constitutes the common good and the necessary attitudes for a good living together is not fixed but essentially contested (Keys, 2006; Tyler, 2006, 2012). On an Aristotelian version, a political community is not a uniform organism but an association built on the interaction of people and hence is dynamic (Keys, 2006: 85). Some political communities may have partly associated being a good citizen with being a good consumer but this conception of good citizenship is not fixed. Faced with the reality of climate change,

⁵ I am indebted to Colin Tyler for this example and argument.

political communities are redefining good citizenship in terms of respect for the environment and sustainable lifestyles.

The capability to show concern for animals and the environment is one of Nussbaum's central capabilities. In her political-liberal version of the capabilities approach, this capability is not constitutive of the human good. One can choose to live a life which does not make use of that capability. In her Aristotelian version, this capability is essential to good human living, and the choice does not bear on whether to make use of that capability or not but on *how* to exercise it within the horizon of the human good which is intrinsically common. The choice of having two cars may facilitate relationships among family members and contribute to the good of the family (members quarrelling less about the use of a single car). But within the context of the good of the wider community to which the family belongs, the choice of having two cars may create more traffic congestion, pollution and greater pressure on natural resources. Viewing the human good and, by implication, the common good, as the *telos* of human deliberation and action has consequences for how one understands human freedom.

Practical reason and freedom

Nussbaum wrote that living well as a human being was about 'performing all one's natural activities in a way infused by human choice and rationality' (1988: 184). She distinguished three steps in Aristotle's account of human reasoning (Nussbaum, 1990b). First, human reasoning is about taking decisions in the realm of contingent and particular realities. Perception of the context is key. What type of decision does the particular context require? Second, in order to decide what to do in a given context, one needs to have some knowledge of what it is that one is pursuing. Given the specific context, what is the best decision so that the good of myself and of the relationships I am part of can be enhanced? Third, human reasoning involves deliberation, a process of choice where means and ends mutually adjust themselves.

Consider human reasoning in relation to the capability for play. I have the capability to take 28 days of holiday leave a year. What to do with them? I could choose to take an expensive holiday overseas in a luxurious hotel with a golf course, or stay in the UK and rent an electricity-free cottage in the countryside, or continue working. These three choices are not equivalent from a common good perspective. If I choose option 1, I may improve the relationship with my partner by taking a holiday, but the carbon emissions generated by my flying will perpetuate relationships of disrespect for the environment, and my holiday may perpetuate unjust relationships in the country – the water for the golf course may have been

diverted from local farming use. If I choose option 2, I may similarly improve the relationship with my partner but I will contribute less to perpetuating unjust relationships with the environment and unjust economic relations (but I may be more depressed because the likelihood of grey and rainy weather may be higher in the UK than a Caribbean beach). If I choose option 3, I will contribute less to carbon emissions but I may contribute to perpetuating a workaholic culture which is detrimental to family relationships.

This example of everyday deliberation, the choice of one's annual holiday, illustrates that some choices are more conducive to the common good than others. Nussbaum (2011a: 39) writes that practical reason, as an architectonic capability, is 'just another way of alluding to the centrality of choice in the whole notion of capability as freedom'. However, the political-liberal version of the capabilities approach detaches freedom from the common good. In the Aristotelian version, it is not so much choice as such which should be protected as the ability for practical reason. Nussbaum alludes to this in her writings on education (Nussbaum, 2010). Not all types of education are conducive to a good society, but one that is developing the capabilities for critical reasoning, putting oneself in the lives of others and exercising imagination.

The move from Aristotelianism to political liberalism has practical implications for the concrete lives of people. Let us consider Wildo.⁶ He and his family live in the Bolivian highlands, making a living out of farming and alpaca breeding. Every now and then, his family goes to the city to sell meat and wool so they can buy what they cannot produce themselves. However, the reality of climate change is limiting the opportunities Wildo has to be and do what he values. The snow showers are no longer sufficient to produce enough grazing for the alpaca livestock. The animals get sick and die. Wildo is faced with a dilemma: continuing to live a life he values but at the cost of malnutrition, or migrating to the city to find another source of living but at the cost of living a life he does not value. A local farming organisation is currently helping him to cope with climate change by using other agricultural methods. How long it will remain possible for Wildo to live the life he values and carry on a way of life close to the natural environment is uncertain.

Within a political-liberal version of the capabilities approach, governments should provide a set of fundamental entitlements which enable people to pursue their own conception of the good. But if people continue to have a lifestyle disrespectful of the environment and

⁶ The story is taken from a video 'Surviving Climate Change in the Bolivian Highlands' at www.cafod.org.uk/climatechange.

which privileges one's own comfort over concern for the common good – such as an individual car, a holiday abroad, plastic-wrapped ready meals, etc. – Wildo's ability to pursue a life he has reason to value will not be guaranteed. In contrast, in the Aristotelian version, there is no neutrality possible – although this does not mean that the good is set once and for all. Wildo's ability to live a life he values depends critically on people elsewhere in the world exercising human freedom according to practical reason, that is, to make choices in view of contributing to the common good.

This point is dramatically expressed in the ongoing struggles of indigenous communities to live a life they value. The freedom of some people to pursue their conception of the good, a life based on material consumption and an instrumental stance towards the environment and exploitation of natural resources, prevents others from pursuing theirs. In a critical discussion of egalitarian liberal accounts of global justice, Robinson and Tormey (2009) narrate the story of a group of indigenous people in West Papua in Indonesia whose lives are threatened by state-sanctioned logging, and examine whether the language of rights and liberal democracy is the best way to protect the lives of indigenous people. Quoting one member of the resistance movement, they write: 'The struggle to free West Papua is not to take away one government and then replace it with a new government. [...] It is a struggle between an ecologically harmonious way of life and an environmentally exploitative one' (Robinson and Tormey, 2009: 1405).

Indigenous struggles and exploitation of natural resources illustrate the limits of liberal account of justice. From an Aristotelian perspective, justice is closely connected to deliberation about the good life (Sandel, 2009). As long as a powerful minority of the world's population continues to live by conceptions of the good which are highly resource-intensive, conflicts are set to continue. The recognition and protection of indigenous rights may however contribute to a common deliberation about the good society and a questioning of an understanding of a good life largely in economic terms.

An Aristotelian version of the capabilities approach

The project of *Creating Capabilities* is to advance an ethical framework which is better at creating an opportunity set for people to be or do what they value than the utilitarian economic framework. Nussbaum sets this ethical framework within political liberalism. I have argued that the purpose of the capabilities approach is more fulfilled when it is set within the Aristotelian ethical tradition from which it arose.

In an Aristotelian version of the capabilities approach, an individual's good and the good of the relationships of which s/he is part are mutually implicating; justice is a virtue of human beings and orients the exercise of human freedom towards the common good. Therefore, the focus of political action is not only to secure central human capabilities as fundamental entitlements but also, and foremost, to nurture the type of relationships needed for such capabilities to be enjoyed. Wildo's ability to do or be what he values is not facilitated by an economic system that subjects the lives of workers and the value of the environment to share prices. As there are material and social structuring conditions to individual capabilities (such as a public health system to give opportunities to be healthy, social norms of gender equality to give opportunities for all to be educated, etc.), so there are structuring conditions which do or do not enable people to exercise practical reason, that is, orient their freedom towards the common good. An economic system which prioritizes economic profits over people's wellbeing, is not conducive to people in that system making decisions in view of the common good.

An Aristotelian version of the capabilities approach reinforces the importance of character formation for creating an environment in which each person can live well. In a recent article on the revolutionary potential of Aristotelian politics, MacIntyre (2011a) argues that most current economic, social, political and educational institutions are inimical to the pursuit of the common good. His critique is fourfold. First, the capitalistic economic system compartmentalises one's life. We engage in different spheres of activities with different roles and expectations. In the family sphere, as a mother, I am expected to have caring qualities. In the professional sphere, as a manager, I am expected to be competitive and better than others. This, MacIntyre writes, 'contrasts with the Aristotelian question: "What would it be for my life as a whole to be a flourishing life? Qua human being, not qua role players in a particular situation"'. (2011b: 12) Second, a capitalist economy has transformed human desire. Children are no longer taught to distinguish genuine goods from false ones, and people are led to desire what the economy wants them to desire. Third, MacIntyre argues, the large socio-economic inequalities have seriously disrupted democratic life. Finally, positive law has become guided by market concerns because the state has become the instrument of the capitalist economy so serving profit maximisation and money making for its own sake.

MacIntyre (2011b) argues that asking the Aristotelian questions – What does it mean to live a good life? What kind of economic or educational system is required for us to live a good life? – is essential for confronting present injustices and re-shaping our current institutions. Are economic practices whose sole aim is profit-making conducive to the

common good? Is the common good better served by an education system which follows the demands of the economy rather than the demand of democracy?

An Aristotelian version of the capabilities approach makes a central claim which, as Nussbaum foresaw in 1988, goes against the stream in Anglo-Saxon political theory: that human lives and communities are teleologically structured (Blackledge and Knight, 2011). Nussbaum (1999) has criticized MacIntyre for offering a view of politics which attaches human reason to divine authority as its ultimate source. This is however a misinterpretation of MacIntyre's Aristotelian revolutionary politics. The *telos* of human action is not fixed. Even what constitutes divine authority is endlessly debated and contested in historical communities.

The destruction of Wildo's life urges us to ask again the basic Aristotelian questions of how we are to live well together, and what kind of institutions, relationships and attitudes are needed so that each and all can live flourishing human lives on one shared planet. The capabilities approach is one of the best frameworks there is for asking these questions again.

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